DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 110 CE 078 783

AUTHOR Anderson, Marcia A.; Wiggs, Linda
TITLE Educational Needs of 21st Century Office Professionals.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Degrees (Academic); Education Work Relationship; *Educational Needs; Employment Qualifications; *Futures (of Society); Higher Education; *Office Occupations; *Office Occupations Education; *Secretaries

ABSTRACT

A research study was conducted to identify the future educational needs of office professionals, including the educational levels, resources, and core business courses that will be required for them to qualify for and maintain their positions. A survey, developed with the help of a focus group and pilot tested for reliability, was mailed to 1,000 randomly selected members of Professional Secretaries International. Findings drawn from 302 usable returned questionnaires showed the following: (1) the largest number of respondents were between 41-50 years of age; (2) about half the respondents made more than $30,000 per year; (3) respondents had an overall average of more than 16 years' experience in office positions, but more than half of respondents had been in their current positions for 5 years or less; (4) approximately 40 percent of respondents had completed a four-year college degree; (5) respondents believed that a two-year community college degree is the minimum educational preparation employees need to get jobs and to be promoted and that four-year degrees merit the highest salaries and greatest potential for promotion in their companies; (6) a majority of respondents believed that professional workshops or seminars are the most beneficial resources office professionals have for maintaining qualifications for their positions; and (7) more than 80 percent listed typing, keyboarding, or computer software applications as the most beneficial courses they had taken, with business communications ranked next most important. The results of the study should provide guidance in preparing programs to assist office professionals. (Contains 15 references.) (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 431 110

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF 21st CENTURY OFFICE PROFESSIONALS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

M Anderson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Dr. Marcia A. Anderson, Professor
Department of Workforce Education and Development
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901-4605

Dr. Linda Wiggs, Professor
Administrative Services Department
Southeast Missouri State University
Cape Girardeau, MO 63701-4710

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED 426 781

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF 21ST CENTURY OFFICE PROFESSIONALS

Never before has the office profession been changing as rapidly as it has in the past decade. Gone are the days when office professionals could learn a few basic skills and assume those skills would suffice to the end of their career (Kozlowski, 1998). Information based technologies combined with downsizing, cutbacks, and company reorganizations have created a magnitude of changes for office professionals. The character of work itself has been transformed. It's no longer enough to know a mouse from a modem--today's executives expect high-level technical expertise from their office professionals (Holyoke, 1997). They answer to multiple bosses, assume responsibilities once assigned to middle managers, and are expected to be technology specialists. Skills that helped office professionals reach the top of their profession in the past are inadequate in today's dynamic offices. According to Stone (1994), office professionals' roles have changed as they are beginning to receive recognition for their knowledge of new systems. Managers have come to realize the level of education, training, and knowledge the jobs require.

There is little doubt that office professionals today have greater needs for advanced skills and technical abilities. Thousands of secretaries now work the latest software or organize data and systems for an entire office. Kerka (1995) and Stone (1995) noted that secretaries are under increased workloads and are assuming duties previous performed by management. Lifelong learning and almost constant retraining are requisites for office professionals to keep pace with changing technologies and to prepare for future challenges. Questions concerning how office professionals will be able to satisfy these educational needs emerge. Do current educational programs provide the knowledge and skills needed by today's office professionals? What options do office professionals have for updating their knowledge and skills? Fenner (1989) stated that as technology continues to develop and expand at such a rapid rate, it becomes more difficult for educators, employers, and employees to keep pace. She suggested the only solution is the development of partnerships between business, education, and the profession.

Purpose and Research Method

This research study was conducted to identify future educational needs of office professionals. Specific questions for which answers were sought included: (a) What educational levels are required for office professionals to qualify for their jobs? (b) What resources are used by office professionals to maintain qualifications for their positions? and (c) What core business courses are needed by office professionals as preparation for their positions?

A descriptive research design using the survey method facilitated the gathering of research data. A focus group provided data regarding educational needs of office professionals. This data contributed to the development of a survey instrument designed to answer research questions. A pilot test for instrument reliability was conducted using office professionals who were asked to complete the instrument and to identify questions regarding the instrument. Changes were incorporated for the final instrument, and approval to gather data was granted by the Human Subjects Committee at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. This study used a national population of office professionals who were members of Professional Secretaries International, The Association for Office Professionals (name has been changed to International Association of Administrative Professionals). A cover letter and the instrument were sent to all 1,000 PSI members randomly selected by the national office of PSI.

Literature Review

Research shows that today's secretaries operate more like information managers rather than "coffee-fetching gofers." Successful secretaries have adapted to the Information Age by expanding their job skills and realizing that knowledge is power (Male secretaries, 1996). The Administrative Development Institute (The impact, 1994) surveyed members of Professional Secretaries International (PSI) and found that 71% of the secretaries were taking on duties such as purchasing office materials, hiring personnel, training and supervising, and supervising quality management programs that had been performed by management. Stone (1994) stated that new responsibilities demand a return to the classroom which creates higher productivity when office professionals are allowed to fully utilize their potential.

According to Waldrop (1994), "about half of Professional Secretaries International (PSI) members say they are frustrated by the lack of training available, and 62 percent of secretaries say computer training would benefit them most" (p. 4). Farnham (1997) said that until recently employers didn't give secretaries a financial incentive to learn new skills. Nearly a third of companies still pay secretaries according to a system known as "rug ranking" which ties pay to the level of the person for whom a secretary works. North and Worth's (1997) research on 1995 workplace competencies found that more than 80% of the entry-level classified advertisements in business/professional areas included technology skills. Marino's (1993) research concluded that despite the promise that technology will expand the roles of support personnel, findings suggested that organizations are not using information technology to change the jobs of these support workers.

Richardson (1998) extended the responsibilities list for office professionals by adding the role of change agent explaining that they have well-developed communication skills, having become skillful at oral communications and listening through the normal process of doing their jobs. From another perspective, Alexander (1996) studied the secretary's new role as trainer and the implications for office educators and found that "Over one-quarter of the secretaries surveyed are training co-workers to use computer hardware, and almost half are training co-workers to use computer software" (p. 23). OfficeTeam, according to Domeyer (1999), identified these five traits, which can be applied regardless of job specifications, as the most critical for administrative personnel: managerial skills, customer service focus, teamwork and ownership, sense of urgency, and initiative.

Findings

Usable questionnaires were received from 302 respondents for a slightly over 30% return rate. The largest number of respondents (N=101; 34.2%) were between 41 and 50 years of age with the second largest group being in the 31 to 40 age group. Manufacturing was listed as the principal business by the largest number of respondents followed by insurance, medical/health care, and education/research. Salary ranges of $36,000 and over were reported by 82 respondents with 80 indicating salary ranges of $30,000 - $35,000. More than half of respondents have been in their current position for 5 years or less. Respondents have an overall average of 16.64 years' experience in office positions with more than half of respondents having been in office support positions for 20 years or less and 32 for over 30 years. Approximately 40% of respondents have completed a 4-year college degree. Table 1 provides a summary of selected respondent demographics.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Categories		Frequencies	Percent
Age	21-30	29	9.8
	31-40	91	30.8
	41-50	101	34.2
	51-60	62	21
	61-74	12	4.0
Total		N=295	99.8
Salary of Respondents	Under 20,000	32	10.9
	20,000-25,000	52	17.7
	25,100-25,900	47	16.0
	30,000-35,000	80	27.3
	36,000 and over	82	28.0
Total		N=293	99.9
Number of Years in Current Position			
	5 years or less	153	51.5
	6-10 years	81	27.3
	11-15	38	12.8
	16-20	12	4.0
	21-25	5	1.7
	over 25	8	2.7
Total		N=297	100.0
Number of Years in Office Support Positions	0-10	64	21.8
	11-20	100	34.2
	21-30	97	33.1
	31-40	26	8.9
	over 40	6	2.0
Total		N=293	100.0
Number of Years with Present Employer	0-10	158	53.9
	11-20	95	32.4
	21-30	33	11.3
	over 30	7	2.4
Total		N=293	100

Educational levels required for office professionals to qualify for their jobs

The first research question addressed educational levels office professionals have acquired to obtain qualifications for their positions. The largest number of respondents listed a 4-year college degree as their own level of education while the second largest number of respondents indicated they had completed a 2-year college degree. Table 2 summarizes educational levels of respondents.

Table 2
Educational Levels of Respondents

Educational Level	Frequency	Percent
4-year College Degree	103	34.22
2-year College Degree	82	27.24
2-year Business School	47	15.61
High School Diploma	40	13.29
Other	29	9.63
Total	301	99.99

Respondents believe a 2-year community college degree is the minimum educational preparation employees need to get jobs and to be promoted to more advanced positions. Respondents perceive the 4-year degree merits the highest salary in their company and provides the greatest potential for promotion. More than half (60.6%) of respondents feel a 2-year college degree is the best preparation for initial job placement while 94 (31.1%) believe beginning office professionals need a 4-year degree. Fewer than 10% of respondents feel high school education is sufficient for initial employment.

Of the 121 respondents who had taken business courses at a community college, 91.7% identified that resource as very beneficial in preparing office professionals. English courses, business courses at a 4-year college, and business courses taken at business schools were ranked as very beneficial by respondents who had utilized these resources. Table 3 identifies resources listed by respondents as very beneficial. Percentages are based on the number of respondents having utilized the selected resources.

Table 3
Resources Identified as Very Beneficial in Preparing Office Professionals

Resource	Respondents Having Used Resource	Frequency	Percent
Business Courses at Community College	121	111	91.7
English Courses	275	239	87.0
Business Courses at 4-year College	169	143	84.6
Business Courses at Business School	151	124	82.1
Self-Learning	292	234	80.1
Workshops or Seminars	298	230	77.2
Company-Sponsored Training	268	198	73.9
High School Business Courses	241	164	68.0
Business Courses at Vocational School	74	39	52.7
Math Courses	255	107	42.0

Resources used by office professionals to maintain qualifications for their position

A majority of respondents believe professional workshops or seminars are the most beneficial resources office professionals have for maintaining qualifications for their positions while company-sponsored workshops or seminars was the second most effective method (Table 4).

Table 4
Resources to Maintain Qualifications for Positions

Resource	Frequency	Percent
Professional Workshops or Seminars	180	60.2
Company-sponsored Workshops or Seminars	55	18.4
Courses taken at 4-year college	19	6.4
Courses at Community College	14	4.7
Professional Journals	12	4.0
Courses taken at Business School	11	3.7
Programs at Professional Meetings	7	2.3
Courses taken at Vocational School	1	0.3
Total	299	100.0

Respondents believe workshops and seminars provide the best opportunity for professional development and are the best sources for additional preparation in the future. Respondents identify advancement in office support careers and technology changes as primary reasons for seeking additional education. Respondents report that new technology has been the major reason for needing additional education in the past. Slightly more than half of respondents (N=163) feel office professionals will need additional

education in the future for technology while approximately one-third (N=120) believe career advancement will be the major purpose for seeking additional education in the future.

Core business courses needed by office professionals

To identify core courses needed by office professionals, respondents were asked to rate business courses they had taken as beneficial, somewhat beneficial, or of little benefit. An almost equal number of respondents listed typing/keyboarding (84.8%) and computer software applications (84.4%) as the most beneficial courses they had taken. Respondents ranked business communication as the third most beneficial course (80.5%) followed by office procedures (75.5%), and office management (71.6%). Table 5 includes a complete listing of core courses rated as very beneficial for office professionals.

Table 5
Core Business Courses Needed by Office Professionals

Courses	Frequency	Percent
Typing/Keyboarding	256	84.8
Computer Software Applications	255	84.4
Business Communications	243	80.5
Office Procedures	228	75.5
Office Management	217	71.6
Office Systems Courses	180	59.6
Business Management	175	58.0
Computer Programming	138	45.7
Recordkeeping	118	39.1
Shorthand/Speedwriting	100	33.1
Business Math	97	32.1
Business Law	69	22.8
Accounting	19	6.3
General Business	15	5.0

All percentages based on 302 responses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Office professionals believe a college degree is the level of education needed to prepare office professionals. Of the 121 respondents who had taken business courses at a community college, 91.7% identified that resource as very beneficial in preparing office professionals. English courses, business courses at a 4-year college, and business courses taken at business schools were ranked as very beneficial by respondents who had utilized these resources. A majority of respondents believe professional workshops or seminars are the most beneficial resources office professionals have for maintaining qualifications for their positions. Company-sponsored workshops or seminars were identified as the second most effective method used by office professionals for maintaining their qualifications.

All data sources confirm the changing roles and expectations of office professionals at all levels in all types of organizations. These office professionals generally indicate they are not being adequately prepared for many of those roles and expectations. It behooves those responsible for preparing, serving, and developing office professionals to closely monitor the rapidly changing needs of individuals in office support positions and develop education/training programs and opportunities to satisfy those needed. The results of this study should provide guidance in preparing programs to assist office professionals.

References

Alexander, M. W. (1996). The secretary's new role as trainer: Implications for office educators. Office Systems Research Journal, 14(2), 19-25.

Dentzer, S. (1994, March 28). Secretaries down the chute. U.S. News & World Report, 116, 65.

Domeyer, D. (1999). Salary levels reflect job complexity. OfficePro, 59(1), 6-9.

Fenner, S. (1989, September-October). Preparing workers for the 1990's: PSI office opportunities model curriculum for secondary business education. The Balance Sheet 71(1), 19-22.

Farnham, A. (1997, May 12). Where have all the secretaries gone? Fortune, 135, 152-155.

Holyoke, L. (1997). Executives want staff to learn advanced PC skills. Workforce, 76(6), 26.

Kerka, S. (1995). The changing role of support staff. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 378 351)

Kozlowski, G. (1998). Where are we headed? OfficePro, 58(6), 2-3.

Male secretaries: A minority but no longer a novelty. (1996, August) Ebony, 51, 90-92.

Marino, P. (1993). Job design and skill level in using information technology: Perceptions of administrative support personnel in financial organizations. Delta Pi Epsilon Journal, 35(3), 121-127.

North, A. B., & Worth, W. E. (1997). Workplace competencies: Trends in advertised entry-level technology, interpersonal, and basic communication job skills, 1992-1995. Office Systems Research Journal, 15(1), 1-6.

Richardson, R. (1998), Summer). From secretary to change agent. Performance in Practice, 14.

Stone, F. (1994). Secret weapon: Your secretary may be an overlooked resource. Management Review, 83(3), 36-41.

The impact of restructuring on the secretarial profession. (1994). Holland, MI: Administrative Development Institute. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 368 900)

Waldrop, J. (1994). More than a typist. American Demographics, 16(4), 4.